

Assessment of Neglect by FIVEO's Social Services Workers

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Methods

The study is a survey of child protection workers. The sample is the approximately forty child protection workers in the Kentucky Cabinet for Families and Children's FIVCO Service Region. They were asked to participate voluntarily and anonymously.

The participants were employees of the Cabinet. A request for exemption from the Institutional Review Board was approved. This exemption was based on the confidentiality and voluntary nature of the study's participants, and the fact that this study was designed to improve public service programs and their methods.

The study was explained and distributed by the primary researcher during staff meetings with the five counties' social services workers. The researcher then left the room. Approximately twenty minutes were given for the actual completion of the survey. The supervisor of the local office then collected the survey ensuring the participants' anonymity. All the responses were then returned to the researcher as a group.

The instrument used in this study was a 22 question multiple response instrument. Assessing the reliability and validity of this instrument was part of the proposed study. This instrument was designed to explore the considerations related to practice in regard to the issue of neglect. It measures the level of agreement the worker has to questions related to current standards of practice and the desire for use of assessment tools designed specifically for determining child neglect. One issue studied is whether or not the level of comfort workers experience when working with possible neglectful families relates to the length of time that the social worker has been employed, the amount of neglect related

cases that they handle, and the factors that they consider when assessing neglect. Possible options that may help them to feel more comfortable were also questioned.

These questions were included in the survey in order to plan for worker training and advocacy for changes in the assessment process that will assist the worker in making objective decisions. They were reviewed and approved by training and supervisory professionals in the FIVCO Service Region.

The data was analyzed using the SPSS data program. Data variables include length of employment, percentage of neglect related cases in total caseload, and factors considered in assessing neglect and working with families with this as an issue.

Results

There were thirty-one completed surveys used to obtain the results of this research. There were six possible responses to twenty-two of the twenty-three questions. The last question was open ended and asked the social services workers for suggestions on improving the process for assessing child neglect.

The questions on the survey instruments can be grouped into four categories. Frequencies were obtained for all questions. Cross tabulations were obtained for each group of questions. Please see statistical charts.

One category of questions asked the workers to rate the level of importance of certain factors related to neglect. For example, how important is it for the worker to assess substance abuse when working with families with neglect as an issue? The vast majority of workers, 96.8 percent (n = 30 agree + somewhat agree + strongly agree), agreed that it is important to assess for substance abuse, with 61.3 percent (n = 19) agreeing strongly. A smaller majority, 77.5 percent (n = 24 agree + somewhat agree +

strongly agree), agreed that it is important for workers to have access to instruments to assess for substance abuse. This result indicates that 32.5 percent of the social services workers feel comfortable assessing for substance abuse without using a specific instrument designed to do so.

One group of questions asked the workers to assign levels of importance to doing tasks that are standards of practice. For example, how important do workers feel it is to explain the criteria for reaching a determination of neglect and documenting it? The vast majority, 95.2 percent (n = 28 agree + somewhat agree + strongly agree) agreed that it is important for workers to explain criteria used for making a determination of neglect to families, but only 80.6 percent (n = 25 agree + somewhat agree + strongly agree) agreed that it was important to document that the family expressed understanding the criteria to the worker. This result indicates that workers assign a lesser degree of importance to documenting compliance to standards of practice than to actually complying with the standards.

A third group of questions related to the workers' agreement that the assessment process needed improvement. This section included questions related to workers having more access to assessment tools including a tool designed solely for the purpose of assessing neglect. A majority or 64.5 percent (n = 25 agree + somewhat agree + strongly agree) of workers agreed that it is important to have a separate tool. What was surprising about this statistic is that 35.5 percent of workers disagreed that a separate tool is important. This indicates that they are satisfied with their current method for assessing neglect. The only open ended question was part of this group of questions. There were six responses to the request to list any ideas the worker had for improving the process for

assessing neglect. Two of the six responses suggested that the Cabinet contract for assessments of neglect. These responses, as well as the ones to the importance of having a separate tool for assessing neglect indicate that workers do not want to make the process any more laborious. Of the other four responses to the open ended question, one worker suggested more training. The other three responses indicate that a change in the process needs to be made for assessing neglect, treating these assessments differently than those for abuse cases.

The fourth category of questions related to how the worker felt about working with families where neglect is an issue. One question in this cluster asked the worker to assign a level of agreement with workers having difficulty in maintaining feelings of hope when dealing with neglectful families. Only 41.9 percent ($n = 13$ agree + somewhat agree) of workers agreed with this with only one worker agreeing and twelve somewhat agreeing. This result was surprising in that it was expected that workers would agree overwhelmingly that it is difficult to maintain feelings of hope while working with families with neglect as an issue.

Several variables were compared to determine if there was a significant relationship between the responses to two questions. There was no significant relationship found between these variables. For example, the length of employment as a Social Services Worker did not have any significant bearing on the worker being more comfortable when assessing neglect than abuse. In fact, the means for the two questions dealing with the type of abuse the worker found more difficult to assess were very similar regardless of length of employment.

Discussion

The FIVCO Region has a goal to continually assess and provide for the training needs of the social services workers of the Division of Protection and Permanency. The results of this study will be used to aid in this task. It will be shared with the Services Regional Administrator Associate for DPP, the Regional Educational Coordinator, and the Region's Training Coordinator so that the results can be evaluated for possible use in developing a training curriculum that the REC is working on presently with training team members of other regions. The general results will also be shared with the social services workers in the Region.

The findings of this study will give background information on the issues that the social services workers consider when working with families where neglect is an issue. The findings will be used to document that social services workers agree that standardized assessment tools for assessing neglect would be helpful, including a separate tool for assessing neglect.

Another positive implication of the study may be the initiation of self analysis on the part of the social services workers in regard to the issues that they consider when working with families where neglect is an issue. This possible side effect will be impossible to evaluate except by self-report of anecdotal evidence. This is a limitation of the study. Given more time and resources, this factor would be helpful to evaluate.

The most important result of the study will be improved services to the families we serve. If gaining this information helps only one family, it will be useful.